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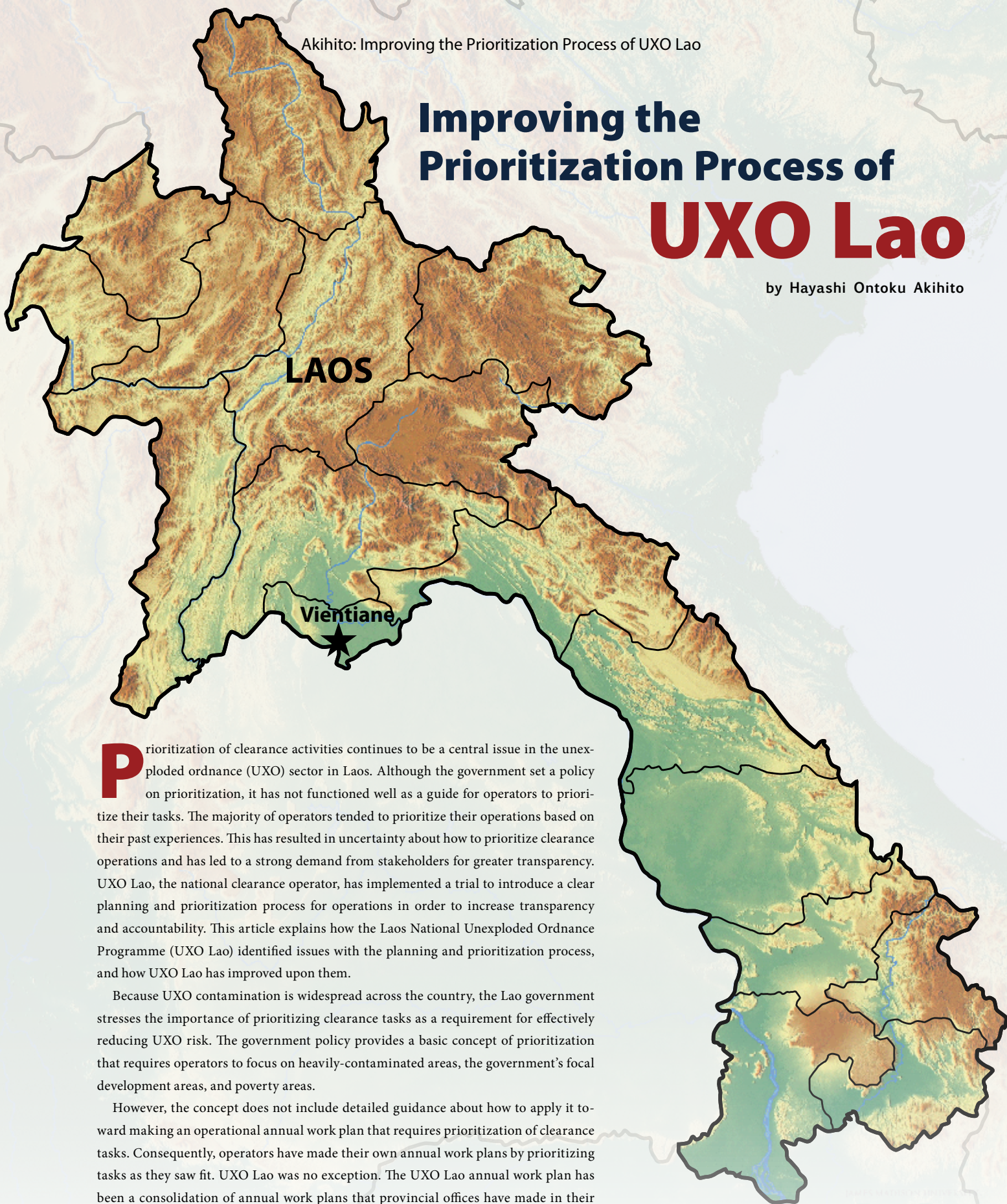
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Improving the Prioritization Process of UXO Lao

by Hayashi Ontoku Akihito



Prioritization of clearance activities continues to be a central issue in the unexploded ordnance (UXO) sector in Laos. Although the government set a policy on prioritization, it has not functioned well as a guide for operators to prioritize their tasks. The majority of operators tended to prioritize their operations based on their past experiences. This has resulted in uncertainty about how to prioritize clearance operations and has led to a strong demand from stakeholders for greater transparency. UXO Lao, the national clearance operator, has implemented a trial to introduce a clear planning and prioritization process for operations in order to increase transparency and accountability. This article explains how the Laos National Unexploded Ordnance Programme (UXO Lao) identified issues with the planning and prioritization process, and how UXO Lao has improved upon them.

Because UXO contamination is widespread across the country, the Lao government stresses the importance of prioritizing clearance tasks as a requirement for effectively reducing UXO risk. The government policy provides a basic concept of prioritization that requires operators to focus on heavily-contaminated areas, the government's focal development areas, and poverty areas.

However, the concept does not include detailed guidance about how to apply it toward making an operational annual work plan that requires prioritization of clearance tasks. Consequently, operators have made their own annual work plans by prioritizing tasks as they saw fit. UXO Lao was no exception. The UXO Lao annual work plan has been a consolidation of annual work plans that provincial offices have made in their own ways. Whereas provincial offices obtain approval from UXO Lao headquarters as a formality, headquarters has had little control over the process or the final product of these annual work plans. Additionally—again as a formality—UXO Lao headquarters

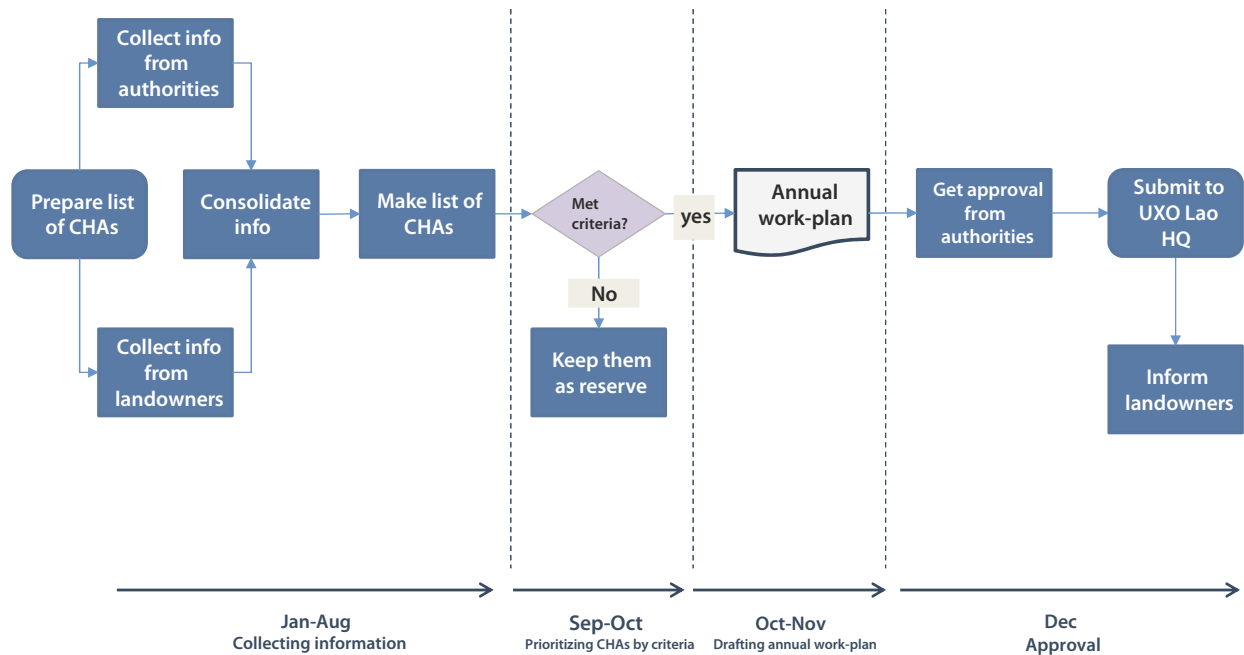


Figure 1. Process of making an annual work plan.
All figures courtesy of the author.

will hold meetings and notify provincial offices when the work-plan making process is to start and when the plan needs to be submitted.

Stakeholders, especially donors, saw this as a problem. There has been no uniform process or method for prioritization across national operators or provincial offices. Transparency and accountability has had limited effect on making annual work plans and prioritizing tasks. Outsiders found the entire process cryptic and would doubt whether planning had been undertaken appropriately.

There has been another driver for UXO Lao to improve the planning process. UXO Lao has been trying to change its operation from a request-based approach to an evidence-based approach. In past operations, UXO Lao cleared land based on requests received from villagers. This became an issue because villagers sometimes requested clearance in plots of land where there was little evidence of UXO. In such cases, UXO Lao found few items of UXO. This approach was frequently taken up as problematic in sector meetings. Subsequently, a new concept of operations, “evidence-based approach,” was introduced. This approach focuses only on clearance of confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs) that survey teams have identified as hazardous after completing technical survey. This change required UXO Lao to revisit its planning process to incorporate the prioritization of CHAs as a new step.

UXO Lao recognized the need to make the planning process more transparent and accountable, and to include the new concept of operations. Following this, UXO Lao, with Japan International Cooperation Agency’s (JICA’s) support, started a project to modify the planning process in 2015. The project aimed at setting up an accountable planning process and defining criteria to prioritize tasks by developing guidelines that all provincial offices could follow.

UXO Lao implemented the three-year project in three southern provinces: Champasack, Salavan, and Xekong. For the first year, project members at UXO Lao headquarters had a series of discussions with the three provincial offices to identify similarities and differences in planning processes among the offices, and from this, outlined a new process that reflected the common elements among the different planning processes. In the second year, the Champasack provincial office tested the new planning process while drafting an annual work plan and reported back to the project members about what worked and what didn’t. The project members were able to consolidate these suggestions and revise the draft process. In the third year, all three provincial offices tested the revised planning process. With findings from the trial, the project team developed a final version of the draft planning process at the end of the project.

There are two key features in the newly-established planning process: a well-defined planning cycle (Figure 1) and clarified criteria for prioritizing clearance (Figure 2). Previously, field staff had a limited understanding of the planning cycle, which was not clearly defined. The new planning process clarified the responsibilities of each staff member, types of actions, and timing of actions. As survey teams identify new CHAs and collect CHA-relevant information throughout the year, they also visit field sites and local authorities to update information on existing CHAs that have not been cleared. Meanwhile, managing staff prepare a list that includes information on both existing and new CHAs. Next, staff prioritize these CHAs based on a list of criteria and draft an annual work plan for the provincial office. Once local authorities receive this draft for consultation and approval, the draft goes to UXO Lao headquarters for final approval.

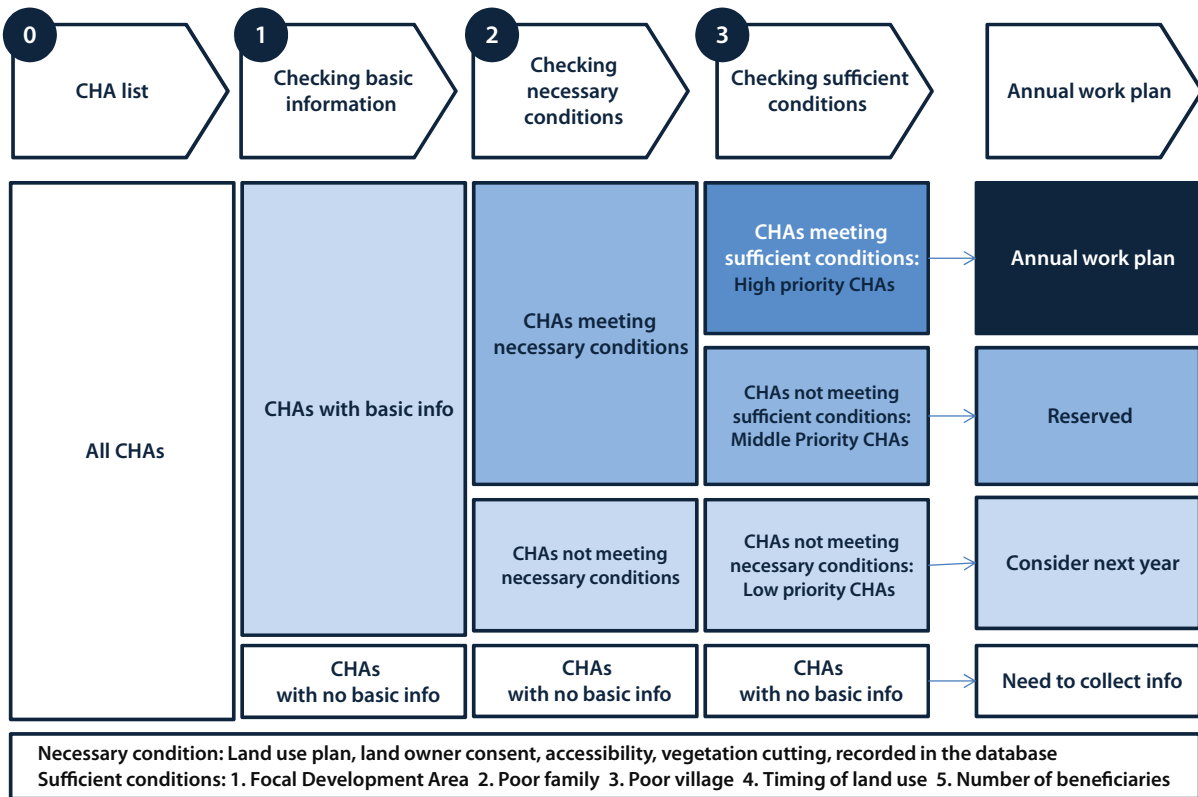


Figure 2. Prioritization of CHAs.

In past operations, the provincial offices prioritized CHA-clearance activities based on their own criteria. In order for all the provincial staff members to follow uniform criteria, the new process clarifies the prioritization mechanism by detailing criteria and setting steps to apply them. The first step is to eliminate CHAs for which basic information such as landowners’ names and number of beneficiaries is missing. This arises when field staff members are unable to collect key information from landowners, either because the whereabouts of landowners is unknown or they live far from the site. In such cases, field staff continue to work on collecting the information for the next year’s annual work plan.

The second step is to further narrow down the CHA list using *necessary conditions*. If CHAs fail to meet any one of the necessary conditions, staff exclude the CHAs from the list and categorizes them as low priority. Necessary conditions include the existence of a land-use plan, landowners’ consent, accessibility, vegetation cutting, and data collection. Staff review the excluded CHAs again the following year with updated information. The third step employs *sufficient conditions* as a screening function to select appropriate CHAs from the list. Sufficient conditions require the UXO Lao staff to check, for example, whether a CHA belongs to a poor village, a poor family, or other criteria. Unlike necessary conditions, sufficient conditions are applied to each CHA one by one. CHAs that meet the first sufficient condition are categorized as high priority and are included in the annual work plan. Subsequently, the remaining CHAs that fail to meet the first condition are reviewed, and CHAs that clear the second condition are put

into the plan. This process is repeated until the total area of CHAs reaches the clearance capacity of each provincial office. These conditions permit staff to filter through and prioritize CHAs from the list.

UXO Lao’s efforts have resulted in the successful implementation of an improved and more transparent trial planning process for CHA clearance. The new process gives stakeholders confidence that activities are properly managed. However, there is still scope to improve the planning process, and it will be tested in six other provinces where UXO Lao is operational to ensure that the criteria for CHA prioritization can accommodate different environments and practices. ©

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of UXO Lao.

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Hayashi Ontoku Akihito is a former JICA Advisor to UXO Lao. He worked with UXO Lao from 2012 to 2018 and was responsible for a project supported by JICA to develop UXO Lao’s capacity in planning, monitoring, and information management. Akihito also coordinated a South-South Cooperation approach between UXO Lao and the Cambodian Mine Action Centre. Akihito is currently employed by the Sasaleawa Peace Foundation.